

Hybrid Identities: A Postcolonial Insight into Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Mistress of Spices*

Anoopama Yadav

PhD Research Scholar

Department of English and Modern Languages

Banasthali Vidyapith, Rajasthan

&

Dr. Tamishra Swain

Assistant Professor

Department of English and Modern Languages

Banasthali Vidyapith, Rajasthan

ABSTRACT

Today's world is as borderless as it has ever been. People are immigrating to other countries at a faster rate than ever before. In this scenario, the postcolonial writers choose literature as a means to address and debate the difficult circumstances that these people face regarding their adaptation to hostland and their adopted lands. These hybrid characters make an effort to build their cultural identities which is open to doubt. These immigrants display a obsequious association to notions like 'home', 'nation' or 'culture' as well as create their selfhood as hybrid identity. The situation is more strained in case of South Asian diaspora because of their background of colonization. This is evident in the writings of Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, who is an Indian Bengali writer and has migrated to the United States. She has efficiently made use of literature as a way to express the elements of hybridity exhibited by the different characters. Her novel *The Mistress of Spices* is a perfect choice for the study of elements of hybridity in different characters. My research paper alludes diasporic condition displaces the individuals from their homeland. But the drive extrinsically approved evenly in the alien land, force them to assent a kind of hybrid existence. This work investigates the presence of elements like otherness, unhomeliness, ambivalence, mimicry in-betweenness and creation of Third Space exhibited by different characters in the light of concepts given by Edward Said and Homi K Bhabha.

Keywords: Immigration, Diaspora, Otherness, Hybridity, Unhomeliness, Ambivalence, Mimicry, In-betweenness, Third Space.

INTRODUCTION

In recent times, a number of third world writers have immigrated to the west. Their developing identity in new surroundings has been instrumental in influencing their style and content of writings. "The double or hybrid identity is precisely what the postcolonial situation brings into being the shift in attitude in the 1980s and 1990s was towards postcolonial writers seeing themselves as using primarily African or Asian forms" (Barry, 2000, 129). The writers who move from one country to another occupy significant position

between culture and countries. They realize that their culture or identity doesn't remain the same as it was earlier. Identity evolves, grows and is subject to many changes. The act of writing makes him/her explore both cultures of homeland and hostland. Memories of homeland are kept alive in his thoughts and imagination in fact, becomes a channel between the self and the world. (Shailja, 2008, 52)

A number of factors like trauma of being displaced from one's own culture, cultural clashes, guilt of fleeing a confining background or tradition and finding oneself in an entirely new world are the issues influence a great number of people in today's world. In this way, the individual is seen as linguistically, culturally and psychologically alienated. Bhabha suggests that basic existential experiences of different groups are different and cannot be equated. Thus family, life and death ageing is different for different cultural and social groups and cannot be considered equivalent to similar practice/experiences in other communities. (Nayar, 2006, 202).

South Asian Diaspora has emerged as most powerful diaspora. "Identity suggests our thoughts and feelings, our psyche presence, our place of habitation and even our longings, dreams and desires" (Swain, 2005, 9). The modern world is dominated by hybrid culture. *The Mistress of Spices* depicts the struggles and inner conflict faced by immigrants who have moved politically, geographically, culturally and socially from India. This population is trying to come to term with a new existence in America.

The culture of west follows the principles of materialism, on the contrary east especially India follows spiritualism. Both the cultures are diametrically opposed to each other. As a result, the characters in this novel face moral dilemma about which culture to follow.

Divakaruni's *The Mistress of Spices* vividly narrates the life of a with inborn magical powers. She is kidnapped by pirates and becomes their queen. Later, their ship wrecks and she reaches an enchanted island. There she is tutored by a mystical figure. After the training, she is transmigrated in an old woman body to an Indian grocery store in Oakland, America. In Oakland, she sells species which act as remedies for those who come to her for help. In the novel, the main protagonist is referred to by four different names exhibiting four different identities. As she continues changing all through the novel, it only explicit the complicity of the conflict of the self that an immigrant has to strive with in a foreign land. As Nayantara becomes Bhagyavati, Bhagyavati turn into Tilotamma and Tilo becomes Maya, she acts as a metaphor for movement, change and strife for survival. It displays the multiple identities she is caught among and struggling for her real selfhood.

This work investigates into the postcolonial concepts given by Homi K Bhabha and Edward Said. To find whether these elements namely, unhomeliness, ambivalence, mimicry, in-betweenness, third space and otherness actually exist in diaspora characters of novel *The Mistress Of Spices*. This work delves deeper to find out if these elements of hybridity exist in Tilo's personality and how these elements influence Tilo's decision to live her life in her own terms with native American Raven.

OTHERNESS

Postcolonial theorist Edward Said has given the concept of othernesses. This concept is thought to be important, especially for diasporas from South Asia having a colonial past His theory helps in understanding the influence of power relation between colonizer and colonized and the reason of otherness and unhomeliness experienced by immigrants in hostland.

People of South Asian countries are not welcomed in west because of their background of colonization. While people consider them as uncivilized, undeveloped, poor, ignorant and criminal. This act only uncovers them the fact that they are “othered”.

In the novel, we encounter the first episode of brutality of racism when on one evening two young white men viciously attacked Mohan, “he hears one of them spit, Sonafabitch Indian, should a stayed in your own god damn country” (MOS, 170).

In the hospital when he was undergoing treatment “questions rattling..... will I walk again, how to make a living now, the right eye, is totally gone”(MOS, 171).

After this traumatic episode, Mohan was left devastated. He was unable to work for his family due to handicap. Ultimately, their neighbors contributed money of return ticket to the couple, “for what else is left for them in this country” (MOS,172). Tilo the main protagonist experiences their anguish and sufferings as though it were her own pain. This is evident from her feelings for the couple. She opines “O Mohan broken in body broken in mind by America, I come back from your story in pieces, find myself assembled at last on the chill floor of the shop. My limbs ache as after long illness, my sari is damp with shiver sweat ... For your story is the story of all those I have learned to love in this country, and to fear for” (MOS,172). Mohan and Veena both felt being othered in America and opted India in its place.

The transnational diaspora try to revive the Indian tradition in their home to nourish or maintain their Indian identity. But when they interact with the native people in form of colleagues or neighbours, their racial identity is interrogated as prerogative minorities and they are anxious by the sense ‘who they are’. Jagjit being a Sikh boy wears a turban. It makes him look weird before other children in the school. He is bullied in the school because of different disposition. He didn’t know English. It became difficult for him to adjust in the school. “He knows only Punjabi still Jagjit whom the teacher has put in the last row next to the drooling boy with milk blue eyes. Jagjit who has learned his first English word Idiot.”(MOS, 38)

When an immigrant is not accepted willingly in adapted land rather entertained as different due to cultural incompatibility and racial discernment which subsequently leads to incapability for integration. Jagjit’s mother scolds him everytime he came back from school in shabby uniform by saying “Jagjit how come you’re always dirtying your school clothes, here is a button gone and look at this big tear on your shirt” (MOS, 39)

When the characters believe being dislocated and they are not willingly accepted in the new society. They will in a definite manner develop a sense of unbelonging that consequently leads to otherness. Due to continuous harassment, it became unbearable for him to continue his studies. So, he refused to carry on his

studies. Jagjit's mother retorted by saying "Jaggi what you meaning you don't want to go to school, what for your father is killing himself working" (MOS,39). Jagjit felt being othered and later changes his way of life to adapt to the environment of America.

IN-BETWEENNESS

Bhabha refers to hybridity as an "in-between" or "interstitial space that gives birth to new signs of identity through a negotiation of difference". (Bhabha 1994, 1-2)

Second generation immigrants who are born in hostland are made to follow Indian traditions by their parents. However, first generation people try to provide their children modern English education based on western culture. As a result, these second generation immigrants face the problem of in-betweenness. As their parents insist that their homeland is India. They accept it willingly or unwillingly. Geeta's parents bring her up in America, providing best education. She scores 'A' grades at all levels and gets a job in a big engineer company. Although her grandfather disliked, her coming late home from office. He remarks "So what if this is America, we are still Bengalis, no? And girls and boys are still girls and boys, ghee and a lighted match, put them together and soon or late there's going to be fire". (MOS, 85-86). Geeta's grandfather objects to her grooming style. He condemns her short hair and makeup and the new car she purchases for herself instead of saving the amount for her dowry.

Geeta retorts back when offered to get married in India according to her grandfather's choice. She loves Mexican Juan and wants to marry him. But she gets stiff opposition from home. She starts living with her friend Diana instead of marrying Juan hoping to convince and get consent of her parents.

The diaspora remain in an "in-between" state which brings about a loss of selfhood in them. These people live in adapted place as a consequence from their endeavor to get over cultural issues and negotiate identities. The immigrant realizes that home is not limited to its walls but is extended further beyond the world. "Inhabit the rim of an 'in-between' reality and the inscription of this borderline existence...bridges the home and the world." (Bhabha 1994, 19)

UNHOMELINESS

The main protagonist in the novel is Tilo immigrated from India. She owns a spice shop in Oakland, California. She uses spices to help her customers who are mostly South Asian, overcome difficulties.

The first instance when Tilo leaves her shop, she experiences strong yearning for a space to call 'home': "I run my hand over the door, which looks so alien in outdoor light, and I am stuck by the sudden vertigo of homelessness" (MOS, 128). Tilo doesn't have a place to call her home and USA is just another place. Her feelings are extreme variations of the diasporic experience where home doesn't exist except in the space of conceiving memory as ideal.

She discovers the past as unavoidable, for the warnings of the First Mother continuously harass her in present. Many times, she dreams of the island and is completely drawn into conversation with the First

Mother from the expanses of space. Her past becomes a part of her existing space, prohibiting her to live in the present.

Divakaruni explicitly offers to point on women and the difficulties, they confront in India and United States as well. Stories of Immigrant women's relocation are based upon the liberating spirit of narrative to explain the emotional and psychological trauma of displacement evolving transnational families and cultural norm, constructing self-esteem and defining again or differently the idea of 'home' and the experience of homelessness.

Tilo and the customers whom she tries to help are all trying to establish again or restore their ties with homeland with the help of ancient traditions which they share in common. The spices and their mystery is a unique link which makes them recall about their common past with nostalgia.

The spices in Divakaruni's novel can heal injury, they can help one to endure through hardships, and they can evoke love and can cure one for from homesickness and nostalgia. The spices can be seen as a portrayal of Indian culture. They also provide immigrants the taste and smell of home while in America. According to Tilo, the spice store is reminiscent of home for a large group of people who view it as a little oasis in their diasporic lives. The shop is visited by people belonging to different sections of the society and from different parts of India like the Mohans, Haroun, Ahuja's wife, Geeta's grandfather, Jagjit, Kwesis and other minorities like the such men's wife. Tilo feels that Indians come to her store in quest of happiness.

The writer emphasizes the only way in which one can turn into American is by adapting into different way the cultures and customs of one's native land and developing them pertinent to new adapted surroundings.

AMBIVALENCE

Bhabha portrays ambivalence as an equivocal sentiment of the relationship of the colonizers and colonized which is determined by liking and disliking, attraction and repulsion, acceptance and rejection by the colonized in the direction of the cultural and social norms and the living standards of the colonizers. The colonized vacillate between the conflicting opinions and then to get assimilate in the society starts to mimic the natives of hostland, which is on the behalf of the colonized is "at once resemblance and menace." (The Location of Culture, 123) It is a conflict for one to keep the balance between two cultural values without leaving one for adoption of the other.

Interestingly, Tilo's ambivalence also what leads to her feeling of unhomeliness as it is only by means of lack of clarity and inquiry that she arrives to become aware of her belongingness to 'home', which turns out to be the United States. Ambivalence helps Tilo to go through the process of self-realization and she can make major decisions of her life. Her relationship with Raven is the ultimate step towards her self-recognition. She acquires autonomy in the free surroundings of US she begins her going further away from cultural boundaries when she begins her relationship with Raven. She acquires free mind and spirit put forth by the hostland, which is strange to her Third World experience.

Ambivalence makes her learn to balance the conservative and liberal aspects of her personality and gains a lot from this experience. Through ambivalence she comes forth as a stronger and more confident woman who is able to live the life in her own way.

Lalita, Ahuja's wife is married to much elderly man. She is fond of tailoring but is not allowed by her husband. He is sadistic towards her. Her condition becomes the same as faced by many Indian women under patriarchal control. She is not permitted any outing. "And the calls...To make sure I'm there. I pick up the phone and say hello and there is his breathing on the end of the line" (MOS, 103). With the help of a helpline found in a magazine she leaves her husband's house. She leads a peaceful life doing what she liked. Ultimately, ambivalence equips Lalita to make major decisions of her life which she found frightening earlier.

Geeta is today's empowered women. Irrespective of strong denial by her parents and grandfather, she leaves home to live a life in her own terms. Geeta makes use of her inner strength to make her way away from restraining control of her parents and grandfather leading a new way life.

MIMICRY

According to Bhabha, "mimicry is constructed around ambivalence" (The Location of Culture, 122). This mimicry is like mockery as the variation between the colonizers and the colonized or to say it as the east and the west can never be wiped away. Hence, mimicry results into the identities which are almost the same like colonizers or the western people but not actually like them.

Diaspora try to pursue the style of living that reflects the attitudes and values of the dominant culture by imitating their style of communication and behaviour, language use, grooming etc. Tilo brings improvement in her personality with a purpose to camouflage in the free culture of America. When she put on her first Western outfit and moves out into the street where her shop is located, she brings about a process of change between two states of mind and develops a state of consciousness that she holds is that of an America, however at the same time it is alien and other consciousness for her.

As a matter of fact, Indians face important transitions in the clothes they have to wear in their hostland. Dress becomes another sign system that indicates the modification made by the immigrants. They have to give their way of dressing in line with that specific country. There is a compulsion to be approved by the people of the new country.

Jagjit develops a wish to imitate the fashion of his American friends. He transformed his life style in accordance with American way of life. He got his hairs cut off in quest to be accepted in American society. "hair that stands up straight and stiff as brush bristles...sullen in T-Shirt and baggy Girbaudjeans and untied laces, the uniform of young America". (MOS, 119).

In defining colonial mimicry, Bhabha explains it as "the desire for a reformed, recognizable other as a subject of difference that is almost the same but not quite." (Bhabha, 1994) This concept is related to multiculturalism. For Bhabha, mimicry is the result of duality that occurs when one culture is dominated by another. As a result, that culture resorts to mimicry of the dominant culture. Members belonging to dominant

culture encourage mimicry. This applies to the colonial condition obviously apart from the postcolonial ones where there is a vigorous force from the minority to simulate the dominant culture. Bhabha sees ways in which mimicry challenges dominant cultures. The discourse of mimicry revolves around ambivalence.

In Homi Bhabha's writings US and Europe don't merely dominate the countries which were colonized. They support mimicry of their culture and hybridity develops in this process.

THIRD SPACE

At the end, Tilo is no longer *The Mistress of Spices* but a woman who loves a man named Raven. He gives her a new name 'Maya'. Love has settled within her mind and body, she closes her shop and finally frees herself from the confined room of spice bazaar. "It is a subject that is encapsulated perfectly in the situation. Tilo is put in how far do one's traditions and values affect how one can assimilate into a new life and how much of them should one give up to fit in"? (Thompson, 2012).

Bhabha describes how the diasporas are trapped geographically in-between two worlds, and culturally in-between two cultures resulting from different cultural, political and national identity. As a result, they rely on their otherness by the adapted.

Bhabha says that at this point the diasporas begins a new life by their 'culture-in-between'. The idea of 'culture-in-between' as a matter of fact is basically the 'Third Space' where one moves to the building of a new cultural identity. Since Third space is an in-between space where the elements of socio-cultural and political are made flexible and at some point fuse into another culture resulting into the creation of hybridity of culture. As a result, these factors decide the diaspora identity as hybrid identity.

The land of opportunity provides them courage and expectations. Tilo, after carefully observing the immigrant people who live happily with the fallible real world, resolves to take a human identity. Geeta's stubbornness in love tempts Tilo to think what she feels is not immoral. Lalita's immigration gives her courage to come out of home and to stand on her own feet. All these ending do not convey that they rely on others. But they learn to withhold the life of reality.

CONCLUSION

Chitra Dinakaruni has presented a wide range of Indian characters, which are diverse flexible and hybrid. They are capable of being adapted or molded in today's world of hybrid culture. The characters continuously interrogate regarding their rootedness, origin, nationality, and their fragmented past, whether in an adapted or native-land context. In fact they are boldly self- assured for self-examination. By employing different examples from the novel *The Mistress of Spices* within the framework of postcolonial concepts theorized by Homi K Bhabha and Edward Said, it is feasible to infer that Tilo and other characters represent the selected elements.

It is interesting to note the impact of various diasporic elements which are not same in nature and intensity when compared. These elements of hybridity compel the characters to make their final decision.

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